

Alaska Migratory Bird Calendar Contest 2014

Background Info for Teachers

Theme this year: “Super Seabirds”

Deadline to enter: February 14, 2014

What are seabirds?



Tufted Puffin

Seabirds are birds that spend almost all their time on or near the sea, like gulls, terns or puffins. They are medium-sized to large birds; most are between the size of a robin and a crow. They get all their food from the ocean. Some spend the winter far out at sea, several hundred miles from land. Others stick nearer to the coast. Seabirds come to land to raise the young birds each summer. Many nest on protected cliffs or islands, often in dense groups called colonies. Some seabirds like jaegers and terns nest on the tundra.

Seabirds have special adaptations that allow them to live at sea and get all their food there. Some eat small fish or shrimp-like invertebrates called zooplankton. Seabirds such as kittiwakes pick their prey from the water's surface. Others, such as murres and cormorants, dive for their prey and chase it underwater.

Gull and tern eggs are popular subsistence foods in many parts of the region. People in Deering, Buckland, Kivalina and Pt. Hope harvest seabirds and eggs (including murre eggs) from nesting sites near their villages.



Murre egg

Why are they “super”?



Murre colony

Seabirds have “superpowers” (a.k.a. special adaptations) that allow them to live way out in the ocean for most of their lives. They usually only come to land to lay eggs. Some of the superpowers of seabirds: the ability to “fly” deep underwater, or to live while drinking only saltwater, or the ability to fly for thousands of miles.

The sight of a seabird nesting colony is a stupendous spectacle. There are birds everywhere – in the air, on the cliffs, in the water – with an accompanying symphony of sounds and smells. It’s amazing how many birds can pack onto one sea cliff by making use of different nesting sites like ledges, burrows, or crevices (*see graphic on following page*).

Nesting Sites of Seabirds

Flat Ground

Glaucous Gull
Glaucous-winged Gull
Arctic Tern
Aleutian Tern

Burrow

Fork-tailed Storm-Petrel
Leach's Storm-Petrel
Ancient Murrelet
Cassin's Auklet
Rhinceros Auklet
Tufted Puffin

Cliff Ledge

Common Murre
Thick-billed Murre
Northern Fulmar

Cliff

Black-legged Kittiwake
Red-legged Kittiwake
Double-crested Cormorant
Pelagic Cormorant
Red-faced Cormorant

Rock Crevice

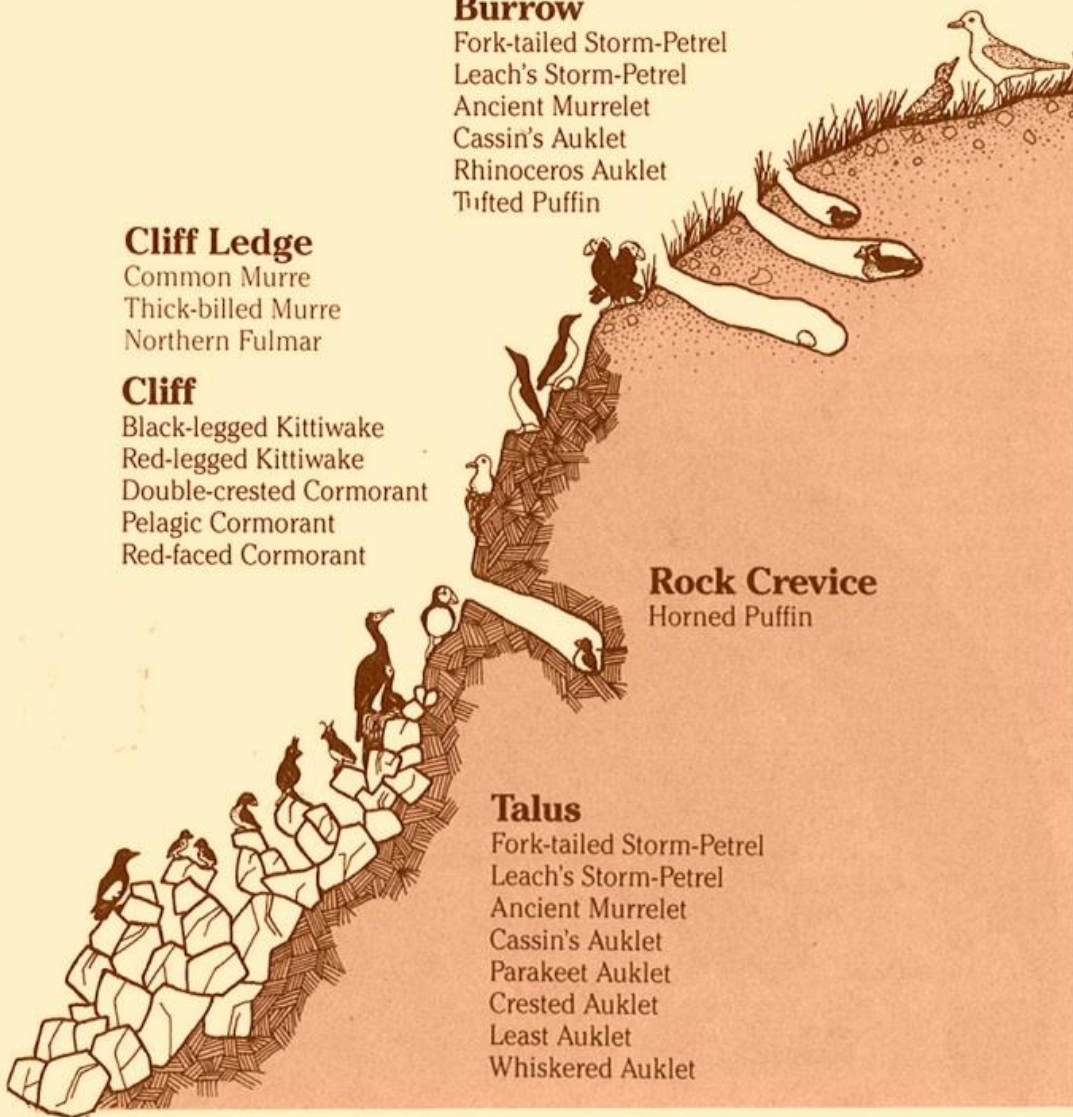
Horned Puffin

Talus

Fork-tailed Storm-Petrel
Leach's Storm-Petrel
Ancient Murrelet
Cassin's Auklet
Parakeet Auklet
Crested Auklet
Least Auklet
Whiskered Auklet

Boulder Rubble

Pigeon Guillemot
Black Guillemot



Seabirds are also super interesting to scientists because they give a clue to the health of the ocean environment. By tracking the numbers and health of seabirds we can see whether they are getting enough food. The small creatures that seabirds eat make up the base of the ocean's food chain, so problems showing up in seabird populations might indicate problems for other ocean dwellers.



Seabirds face challenges such as introduced predators, fishing practices, trash in the ocean. But seabird species have been a part of some of Alaska's greatest conservation success stories:

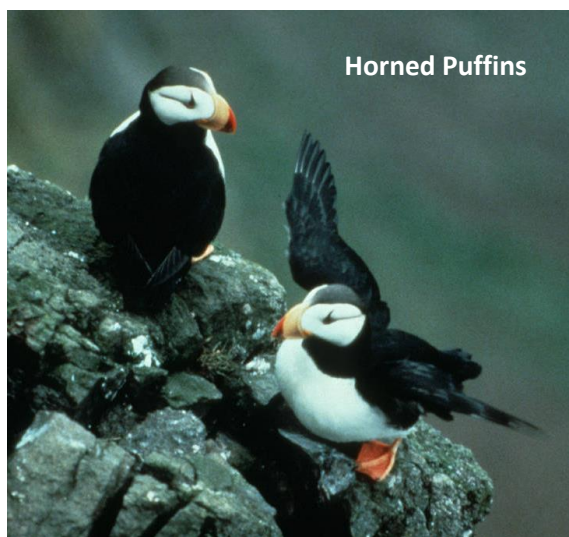


-Rats took over an island in the Aleutians after a shipwreck in the 1780s, and killed most of the birds that nested there. In 2008 the US Fish & Wildlife Service and several partners exterminated the rats, and now birds are coming back! The island, which had been named Rat Island, has gone back to its original name of Hawadax.

<http://www.islandconservation.org/news/article.php?id=51>

-Short-tailed albatrosses visit Alaska, but nest only on 2 small islands in Asia. Their main breeding colony is an active volcano. Part of the recovery plan for this endangered bird is to establish another viable nesting population. An international team including Alaskan and Japanese researchers are working to hatch and rear chicks on Mukojima.

http://www.fws.gov/alaska/fisheries/fieldoffice/anchorage/endangered/pdf/factsheet_stal.pdf



What seabirds do we have in the Northwest Arctic?

These are the seabirds that live along the coast in our part of Alaska:

Jaegers, Gulls, and Terns

[Pomarine Jaeger](#) (*Stercorarius pomarinus*)

[Parasitic Jaeger](#) (*Stercorarius parasiticus*)

[Long-tailed Jaeger](#) (*Stercorarius longicaudus*)

[Bonaparte's Gull](#) (*Larus philadelphia*)

[Mew Gull](#) (*Larus canus*)

[Herring Gull](#) (*Larus argentatus*)

[Glaucous Gull](#) (*Larus hyperboreus*)

[Sabine's Gull](#) (*Xema sabini*)

[Black-legged Kittiwake](#) (*Rissa tridactyla*)

[Arctic Tern](#) (*Sterna paradisaea*)

[Aleutian Tern](#) (*Onychoprion aleutica*)

Tubenose Birds

[Northern Fulmar](#) (*Fulmarus glacialis*)

[Short-tailed Shearwater](#) (*Puffinus tenuirostris*)

Cormorants

[Pelagic Cormorant](#) (*Phalacrocorax pelagicus*)

Alcids

[Common Murre](#) (*Uria aalge*)

[Thick-billed Murre](#) (*Uria lomvia*)

[Black Guillemot](#) (*Cepphus grylle*)

[Pigeon Guillemot](#) (*Cepphus columba*)

[Kittlitz's Murrelet](#) (*Brachyramphus brevirostris*)

[Least Auklet](#) (*Aethia pusilla*)

[Crested Auklet](#) (*Aethia cristatella*)

[Horned Puffin](#) (*Fratercula corniculata*)

[Tufted Puffin](#) (*Fratercula cirrhata*)

The following web page has a list of all the seabird species in Alaska, as well as detailed information about each type of bird:

http://www.fws.gov/alaska/mbmp/mbm/seabirds/species_list.htm



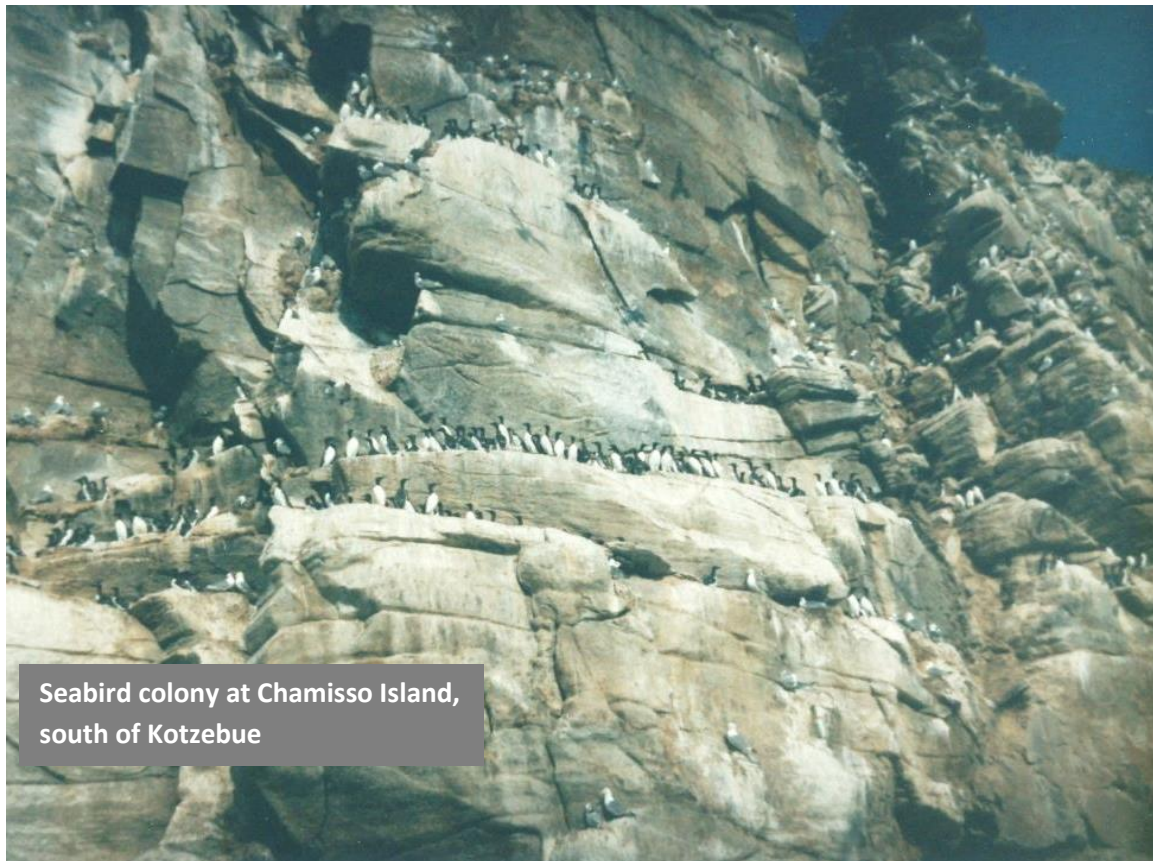
Recommended videos to better appreciate seabirds:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdTdHtuTQ_g seabird colonies in Scotland give you an idea what a busy nesting area is like. Nice footage, but these are Atlantic species, so don't draw pictures straight from the video!

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QAHawigrH9w> auklets in Aleutians – amazing numbers of small birds flocking together

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZtowVki4lj8> cool underwater footage of seabirds diving for fish

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DtfAhy2lgAA> quick intro to “marine debris” and how plastic trash in the oceans is dangerous for seabirds and other creatures



Educational Activities:

The online “Learn about Seabirds” curriculum at:

<http://www.islandsandocan.org/education/Seabird%20Curriculum%20book.pdf> includes background info, activities, and materials (coloring pages for younger kids, relays, seabird food web games).